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Strength within and for the greater good.

Tapping into Strength

A friend just landed a new job. “You won’t believe it,” she said at a gathering, “I’m working for Tony Robbins!” Now, everyone but me knew that name! Maybe you do? Tony Robbins is a famous self-help guru, author of the book, *Awaken the Giant Within* – he has a big presence on line, and he helps people identify their strengths and succeed.

Our culture sees personal strength as a desirable trait. Google the words “cultivate strength,” and you’ll find a flood of links: “Discover your strengths.” “Unleash your signature strengths.” And this one caught my eye: “It’s important to identify your strengths.” Why? Because, it says, they set you *apart* from everyone else; they lead to greater *success*; and they make your life more *productive*, and lastly: identifying your strengths helps you experience a feeling of *rightness*.

Do we *want* to be set apart? And what about that feeling of *rightness* as a goal? Sure, that was just one link – but it was on the first page, high up, reflecting at least the search engine’s priorities which are formed by the links we click on....

Strength is important. Passion and momentum and muscle, strength of purpose...strength makes wonderful things happen. Innovation. Justice. Creativity. Delight. Think of the strength of love. Humans use strength for other purposes, too – personal gain and power, the extremes of which we see in our systems of oppression not to mention a history of colonization, slavery, genocide and war.

And so, where does strength figure here, in this bright peaceful space where we gather? What aspects of strength shall we cultivate in ourselves? Where do you find your strength? From within, from each other, from on high?

The circumstances of our lives call us to tap into our inner strength all the time. We look within when we’re working through something or searching our souls to find the way forward. When we muster the discipline to make changes in our lives, we are building reserves of inner strength. When we meditate and make music and pray, our inner strength grows. Sometimes we build up our reserves by journaling, gardening, walking the dog, stretching our bodies. And so our strength takes shape, sometimes flickering, sometimes steady.

Some strengths we just have. If you’ve ever had an astrological chart done, it’s all red and blue lines, based on the location of the sun, moon and planets at the time of your birth. The red lines indicate areas of challenge and potential growth (they might point to your relationship to work or to money or to other people), while the blue lines are your gifts, your natural strengths. You may be gifted with intellectual brilliance, an eye for beauty, financial acumen, a great ear. Maybe you have a special warmth, a way with words, a passion for fairness.

An astrologer I met a lifetime ago listed off strengths on my chart but didn’t spend much time there. “It’s much more interesting,” she said, “to look at what gives your life *grip* (those pesky

red lines). Just think of your strengths as sitting right here on the shelf, there when you need them.”

We all have strengths. Some people think of themselves as strong. Some are narcissists, alas, who will happily tell you about their strengths – then again, narcissism is a personality disorder, one of extreme selfishness and a grandiose view of one's own talents and a craving for admiration. But others, too, embrace their strength – thanks to change-makers through the years, this no longer breaks along gender lines.

Many people do not identify as strong. They are more aware of their weaknesses than their winning qualities, deficits they need to work on. We don't feel strong when life disappoints us or scares us. Not when we feel helpless or vulnerable. We can lose sight of our strength and feel weak when people abandon us, or hurt us, when they leave us behind or don't hear us.

For some people, it's easier to see each others' strengths than to see our own. Do you think of yourself as strong? As powerful? You are. Looking around this room, I see strength. I see it in spades. I see it in every one of you. The way you've bounced back from a rough patch. The way you've endured heartbreak. The way you've stepped into responsibility. Taken initiative to get something done. I see strength in how you show up for life, how you tell your truth and live it.

Strength has shown itself in many forms this past week. Physical strength: a teenaged boy, a kid who works out, overpowering a younger girl, leaving her with lifelong trauma. Emotional strength: a grown man loudly defending himself, his outrage strong and forceful and, out in the hall, survivors of sexual assault demanding in tears the attention of those in power: “Don't look away from me. Look at me when I'm talking to you!”

We've also seen inspiring inner strength this week. Strength in composure and discipline. Strength born of years of deep personal work, most of it alone. Strength in braving the fickle public sphere of power and politics for a larger purpose. We've seen strength in speaking out for due process.

And we've seen strength in numbers this week – in a committee seemingly stacked from the get-go, in TV ratings through the roof, in calls and letters to senators and legislators. We've seen strength in protests on every side of this story.

And so we sit with *our* strength. Our individual strengths, always there on the shelf when we need it, and our collective strength. Strength that, in the history of this Unitarian Universalist faith tradition, has changed the world. For the good.

The list of ways that our forbears have used their strength to make a difference is long, and we'll have a session soon about Unitarian Universalist history. In the 1800s Boston Unitarians organized the first public kindergartens. Unitarian and Universalist suffragettes led the crusade for the woman's vote. In the forefront of advocating for civil rights, equal marriage, the right to choose and addressing income inequality, our faith tradition is not only about nurturing strong souls, but also about using strong values to help heal this broken world together.

A poem called “Blackbirds” about the power and the beauty and the strength of many, by Julie Cadwaller Staub:

I am 52 years old, and have spent
truly the better part
of my life out-of-doors
but yesterday I heard a new sound above my head
a rustling, ruffling quietness in the...air

and when I turned my face upward
I saw a flock of blackbirds
rounding a curve I didn't know was there
and the sound was simply all those wings
just feathers against air, against gravity
and such a beautiful winning
the whole flock taking a long, wide turn
as if of one body and one mind.

How do they *do* that?

Oh if we lived only in human society
with its cruelty and fear
its apathy and exhaustion
what a puny existence that would be

but instead we live and move and have our being
here, in this curving and soaring world
so that when, every now and then, mercy and tenderness triumph in our
lives
and when, even more rarely, we manage to unite and move together
toward a common good,

[we] can think to ourselves:

ah yes, this is how it's meant to be.

We have a choice about where we *do* exercise our strength and also, looking forward, where we *want* to use it. Let us take care out in the world and notice when we use our strength and why. Let us notice when it is and isn't helpful. When tempted to exercise our strength, let us think first. Beyond satisfaction, how will taking a strong stand, flexing muscle, play out in this community? How will it play out in this world we so love?

For *what* do you truly wish to pour on your strength?

Let the flame of strength within you grow and burn bright. Feed it. You know how. And let us keep our eyes on the prize of a better future and the greater good. For this, together may we be strong.

So may it be.